Cultural landscapes of a tourism destination: South Australia’s Barossa Valley

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Contemporary discussion on the concept of cultural landscapes is moving towards acceptance that such landscapes have both tangible and intangible elements; that they have both space and time dimensions (Sauer 1925) and that they include both cultural and natural landscape features (see eg Cleere 1996; Head, 2000; NPS 2004; UNESCO 2005). Amongst cultural theorists, it is accepted that landscapes can be seen as a form of text, which will be read differently and have different meanings for different groups and individuals (Arnesen 1998; Duncan and Duncan 1988:118).

Landscape interpretation depends on the existing mindset of the interpreter, and is influenced in part by what we already know or expect, in part by the things which interest us most – history, vegetation, food and wine, visual arts, spirituality, architecture. The way we see a cultural landscape is also influenced by whether it is a landscape that is intrinsic to our identity or one that is constructed and viewed by outsiders; whether we live in it or are visiting it for a day, a month or a year.

These distinctions all affect the way that places are promoted as tourism destinations and how they are experienced by travellers, all of whom carry their own constructions of the cultural landscapes they visit. These can be shaped by a wide range of influences, including literature, film, television, paintings and cookery books. They will also be shaped by representations of regions and sites created by tourism marketers, and by the cultural background of each traveller.

Tourism marketing of places concentrates on sights and attractions rather than sites and landscape meaning. (Rojek 1997:53, Urry,1990:11). Expectations of travel are often built on idealised images, in which the attraction or sight/site is separated from the everyday aspects of the lifestyle and landscape/environment around it. It is the contrast between our own everyday patterns of behaviour and cultural beliefs and the practices of different cultures that attracts us. (Rojek 1997:71)

The fundamental product in tourism is the destination experience (Ritchie and Crouch 2000:1), and tourism therefore constructs places as destinations within which certain sorts of experiences will be available (Suvantola 2002). – either by just being in a place, or through purchasing aspects of it, such as accommodation, food, or visits to sites and attractions (Pearce and Moscardo 1984).

Destinations and attractions compete fiercely to attract visitors. Both tourism marketing agencies and various elements of the tourism industry are players in the competition. Each organisation will represent a place in what it perceives to be the most advantageous in market
terms and select place-promotion images on the basis of what they think will sell best. Competition, therefore, centres on the destination.

Destination image has a crucial role in individuals’ decision to travel to a particular place. It is also a crucial factor in visitor satisfaction, as the previously held image is compared with the visitor’s perceptions of the destination when they are actually there, and assessed according to whether it meets expectations (Chon 1990; Selby and Morgan 1996; Ritchie and Crouch 2000).

Tourism selects globally recognisable elements of place over those with local meaning to create destinations, and prefers the ‘extraordinary’ or ‘wonderful’ to the everyday or ordinary. (Relph 1976; Wang 1999; Terkenli 2002). Local communities will construct the same destinations from a different starting point, and their representations can provide richer detail and finer nuances than marketing images. They are more likely to tap into the richness of contemporary life, to reflect their own value systems and to have multiple layers of meaning.

Although tourism marketing rarely constructs it this way, the cultural landscape of any place is an integral part of any destination, and therefore will have a profound effect on the tourism experience. It will surround visitors wherever they go, but their awareness of this will depend on what they already know about their destination and the information they get when they are there.

Suvantola (2002:181)argues that experience of place is much more intense when it is discovered by the traveller, ‘lived’ rather than ‘seen’. But this requires time, and a willingness to engage at a fairly deep level in learning about the cultural and landscape and cultural practice. To achieve this intense experience of cultural landscapes, it is necessary to go well beyond their representations in tourism marketing imagery.

The tourism marketers who produce destination images are usually ‘outsiders’, not members of the communities who live in those landscapes- those for whom they are home. Representations developed by local communities are likely to be richer and more complex than those developed specifically for tourism, and to contain additional meaning structures, because of the depth and breadth of community cultural memory.

Alternative ways in which the cultural landscape of South Australia’s Barossa Valley is represented are examined briefly to demonstrate the difference in cultural landscape representations in recent tourism marketing print materials of the region, and in a large-scale textile artwork completed by a group of thirty nine Barossa women in 1999.

The tourism imagery of the region in print media and on the internet focuses mainly on food, wine and German heritage. As interest in wine tourism is developing, wine is coming to dominate the Barossa’s tourism marketing. Printed regional tourist guides are the main marketing tools for the South Australian tourism regions, and for the majority of businesses who make up the tourism industry in each region. The covers of the regional tourism guides over the last four years have moved from an image of a typical small Barossa Lutheran church surrounded by vineyard and framed by gum trees; to a happy foursome picnicking on the grass, wine glasses in hand, in a treed park in front of a winery designed in ersatz-chateau
style. The most recent guide has several tasting glasses of richly coloured wine standing on top of an oak barrel, which is a very narrow interpretation of the cultural life of the Barossa. (Figure 2)

Images within the guides are mostly vineyards and wineries, there are always a few of the Lutheran churches, and many images of food, wine and festivals. All of these representations of the Barossa are authentic, in the sense that the scenes exist, the wine and food grown in the region are enjoyed with familiar pleasure by local people, and that the year is punctuated with events centred on wine, food and music. Yet it is a much narrower base of cultural landscape representation than that featured in The Barossa Valley Wall Hanging.

The creators of the hanging chose what to include in their representation of the Barossa, based on discussions of places, memories and aspects of daily life important to them. The hanging portrays key elements of the Barossa’s history, heritage, people and places, with the valley folds set against the distinctive profile of the Barossa Range. The hanging includes many of the historic landmarks of the Barossa: wineries, churches, settlers cottages, barns, bake-ovens and German wagons. Community celebrations such as the Barossa Vintage Festival are represented, along with the music and food which are such an important part of Barossa life. The places and activities represented in the hanging were chosen because they were well known, had an identifiable shape, historical significance or thought to be important to the wider community.

This piece of cultural landscape interpretation grew up from and out of a community group’s sense of itself, of the things that mattered to them.
The paper will compare cultural landscape elements included in this piece of community art work with the types of images included in recent tourism promotional material for the Barossa region.

References
UNESCO Cultural Landscapes http://whc.unesco.org/exhibits/cultland/categories.htm